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## The Politics of Asylum: Salvadoran Women and U.S. Policy

### Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."



# The Politics of Asylum: Salvadoran Women and U.S. Policy

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Women in front of an FMLN mural in El Salvador

## INTRODUCTION

I felt the point of the knife on me and then I felt the baby. At that point I could only think of the baby. They put the point of the knife into me again.

"Yes, now I am going to kill you," one of them spat out.

Then another man came in. He said, "Don't hurt her like that. Why are you treating her like that?" He was trying to act like he was going to be nice to me. But then they drew me on the floor and the other one said, "No, no. We can't let women like her just leave. We have to take them and just fuck them." And then they both raped me.

I think this was probably the worst thing that happened to me. I'll never forget it. At that moment I wanted to die (Tula 135).

These are the words of Salvadoran COMADRES activist María Teresa Tula. During the civil war in El Salvador, she worked with other women to locate the disappeared and protest government repression. Tula experienced a multitude of beatings, torture, harassment, humiliation, and threats from the Salvadoran military, yet Tula's story did not convince the American government that she had been persecuted and Tula was subsequently denied political asylum. Tula's denial is not unique: women have great difficulty in obtaining political asylum due to the language of the law, narrow definitions of persecution, politics, and disbelief. This article will examine the construction of asylum law and its exclusion of women. By analyzing legislation, court cases, and government statements, I will attempt to pull out the gender assumptions at play in U.S. asylum policy. Finally, I will utilize *testimonio* literature to illustrate how women are persecuted in a gender-specific manner and the ways in which Salvadoran women resisted the violence they faced.

It is estimated that women comprise seventy-five percent of refugees and the displaced (Wali 336). The definition of a refugee that is generally recognized today was constructed in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country (LeMay 237)." The categories of persecution have remained



Photo by Mike Oso. <http://mikeoso.homestead.com>

relatively static since this definition was written. Twenty-nine years later, the 1980 Refugee Act was created and its definitions of a refugee are generally the same as those created in 1951. Asylum is the legal protection offered by a country to protect refugees (particularly those fleeing political persecution). This



act is the most frequently cited piece of legislation when it comes to asylum cases. Its strict categorization of persecution frequently excludes women's struggles and experiences.

The status of women in a specific place and time dramatically affects how a woman is treated as a displaced person. Refugee camps often turn into a new site of the same oppression for women, due to mass rape, violence and other mistreatment that is prevalent in such areas (Wali 336). A displaced person is typically without legal support, being that their rights are suspended because they lack citizenship (Wali 336). Refugee camps and other such aid typically do not consider women as having particular needs and concerns different from males. The ignorance about women's specific status in the world and as displaced people goes beyond the refugee camp: gender-blind asylum legislation and biased immigration judges also clearly misjudge the "equality" between men and women.

## EL SALVADOR: A BRIEF HISTORY

The case of El Salvador can be seen as representative of U.S. foreign policy, particularly towards Central America, during the Cold War. In the 1970s and 1980s U.S. foreign policy was ruled by heavy anti-communism, militarization, and systematic repression. El Salvador's civil war started brewing in the late 1970s when the lower classes started calling for agrarian reform that would break up the land ownership of the wealthy and distribute it to the poor. This was accompanied by the birth of Liberation Theology, a new policy that urged the Catholic Church to side with the struggles of the poor. The agrarian reform movement and the Church's declaration to side with the poor were both perceived by the American government as communist threats. During the 1980s, the U.S. put significant energy into maintaining control over Latin America, fearing that communist regimes within close proximity to the U.S. could prove disastrous. The U.S. feared that the communism would spread, causing revolutions that would lead to U.S. economic interests being seized all over Central America and South America.

Militarily, the U.S. used the School of the Americas (SOA) to train the Salvadoran military to serve American

interests. The twelve-year war was plagued by U.S. military leadership and training from the school that resulted in massacres, widespread repression, terrorism, torture, rape, and murder. Nineteen out of twenty-six of those found to be responsible for the murders of six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter in El Salvador received training from the School of the Americas. Two out of three of those responsible for Archbishop Oscar Romero's murder were SOA trained. Three of five of those accountable for the killing of four U.S. churchwomen serving in El Salvador came from the SOA. In the El Mozote massacre, where an entire town was massacred, ten out of the twelve responsible were trained by the School of the Americas (Nelson-Pallmeyer 32). These statistics speak to the stark reality that the U.S. fought the war by funding the SOA and the Salvadoran military. The gross human rights abuses that were carried out by SOA graduates reflects their training; training that only concerns itself with killing so-called communism, at whatever cost. A Cold War perspective of Central America backed U.S. military training and financial support. This vantage point was also present in the asylum system, which feared allowing refugees from politically volatile El Salvador. Cold War fears of Salvadorans were coupled with the sexist views of asylum judges, creating a hostile and oppressive environment for Salvadoran women seeking asylum.

## GENDER-SPECIFIC TORTURE

The torture of women in war is markedly different than that of men. Women are often targeted just for being women, because of their significance to the social structure. Torturing women is used as a political tool to destabilize a population. Ximena Bunster writes about the specific torture of women in Latin America in "Surviving Beyond Fear: Women and Torture in Latin America." The torture of women in El Salvador is strikingly similar to the women of the Southern Crone, which Bunster describes. Within the militaristic state, the torture of women has specific aims and definitive meanings. The torture of women is institutionalized within the military state.

It seems that military regimes exhibit the impulse of the state to secure and

defend the patriarchal structure and privileged status of "masculinity" more blatantly than do other authoritarian states. The military state understands itself to be run for the perpetuation and extension of the values of the military, masculinity, power, and public authority...It is founded on the assumption that women and notions of the "feminine" are tools to be used by men; simultaneously, militarism as an ideology purports that women are fearsome threats to public order, to the hierarchy defined and controlled by men (Bunster 102).

In the predominantly Catholic context of El Salvador, ideas of *machismo* (male as strong and dominant) and *marianismo* (woman as virginal and morally superior) have been deeply embedded into identity (Bunster 100). Because the emphasis on women's morality is particularly strong, any kind of sexual torture is extremely hard-hitting; it may cause the survivor to have unrelenting shame in her own body and prevent her from talking about the violence out of fear of social ostracism. By torturing women with sexual violence, the captor attempts to put women "back in their place," i.e. the home. Political women are violated so as to cut down their activism by forcing shame into their lives.

There are several instances where women and men are tortured and harassed in similar ways. Women and men have been stalked and harassed daily. Military personnel, who get to know everything about the person's life, follow them day and night. This information, about his/her family, friends, and daily activities will later be used to torture his/her and those she/he has contact with. Political activists and people associated with them often have to move continuously and sever ties with friends and family in order to protect themselves and others.

Female body parts become a key point of difference between men and women prisoners. Women's sexual body parts: the breasts, the womb, and the genitals are all sites of intense cruelty. "Women's torment is comparatively much worse than men's because it is painfully magnified a thousand times by the most inhumane, cruel, and degrading methods of torture consciously and systematically directed at her female sexual identity and female anatomy" (Bunster 109). Frequently, the captors begin by forcing



the woman to strip. This is meant to invoke shame and to entertain the captors. This is matched with ridicule, mind-games, beatings, and extreme objectification of the woman's body (Bunster 111). Rape and sexual assault are common forms of torture as well. In a society where a woman's sexuality is closely guarded, being raped has a tremendous effect on a woman's sense of self-worth and trust. Physically, a sexual assault survivor has to deal with the possibility of pregnancy and STDs, as well as internal injury. These possibilities may lead a woman to have prolonged physical injury and deep stress, worry, and depression.

The psychological results from torture are numerous and deeply embedded. Such persecution, predominantly at the hands of men, undoubtedly can create an intense fear of men. This can have a significant impact on her relationships with family, friends, and spouses. Surviving sexual violence, without treatment, can lead to depression and suicide. The shame that comes with violence such as disfigurement and rape can prevent a woman from ever speaking about the crimes done against her. In the Catholic cultural context of El Salvador, this humiliation is intensified due to the strict construction of womanhood. Rape and sexual assault also leave women feeling disempowered. Such a lack of control over what happens to one's body is devastating to a woman's psyche. Experiences with torture can affect her sleep and ability to function in society. The horrific experiences that so many Salvadoran women faced during the war prompted many to apply for asylum in the United States, with the hope that the services available in the U.S. and the relatively stable environment could provide a safe haven.

## THE 1980 REFUGEE ACT: HISTORY AND TERMS

The 1980 Refugee Act was born out of the brunt of Carter's presidency. Controversy about the prior legislation, the 1953 Refugee Relief Act, prompted a change in the language of the legislation. It distinguished between "refugees" and "escapees," the latter being those fleeing communist regimes, especially those supported by the U.S. government (LeMay 237). The emphasis on communism led to policies that drastically prioritized those fleeing "communist" regimes, leaving little room for those seeking asylum from

authoritarian and military dictatorships. The 1980 Refugee Act remedied this by taking out communism from its list of persecutions. The Act defines a refugee worthy of asylum as:

...any person who is outside of any country of such person's nationality ...unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion...(LeMay, 273).

Besides this minor alteration, the language remains strikingly similar to the previous legislation. Likewise, the Carter and Reagan administrations continued to prefer those fleeing communist regimes and to reject those escaping from repressive governments. This was often tied to U.S. political



A woman victim of El Salvador's government repression. Photo by Mike Oso. <http://mikeoso.homestead.com>

support of those military regimes, such as in El Salvador. It is important to clarify at this point that asylum policy should not be seen as having a purely humanitarian function. Though it may have some humanitarian interests in mind, the decision to allow refugees from a country is highly political. By granting refugees asylum, the government is publicly denouncing the powers that oppress in that country (Loesher and Monahan, 15). In the case of El Salvador, refugees were consistently denied for years because allowing them would have disrupted the U.S.'s ability to intervene in El Salvador. Because the U.S. was financially and militarily supporting the Salvadoran government, to grant asylum to those persecuted by the government would be to denounce itself. This practice is blatantly clear in

the approval rates of Salvadoran applicants in the early 1980s. In 1981, when the war was reaching a boiling point, two Salvadoran applicants were approved and 5,510 were denied. In 1983, the applicant pool swelled to 13,045 and 328 were approved (Loescher and Scanlan 193).

The language of the 1980 Refugee Act is gender blind, in that it is written with the assumption that it would be implemented in such a way that the gender of the applicant would not matter. It does not differentiate between male and female applicants explicitly. However, the commonly used definitions of "persecution," "social group," and "political affiliation," as well as the application of the public/private distinction of crimes illustrate the androcentrism, or male-centeredness, of asylum law. When analyzed, it becomes abundantly clear that the legislation was written by men, the "typical" applicant is presumed male, and that the law generally prefers male applicants and men's experiences.

The definition of persecution in the 1980 Refugee Act only includes violence inflicted due to "race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (LeMay 273)." This definition is limited to aspects of what are typically seen in western society as "civil rights." These types of rights tend to exclude women.

The primacy traditionally given to civil and political rights by developed nations is directed toward protection of men within public life, in the relationship with government. But this is not the arena which women most need protection. The operation of public/private distinction at a gendered level is seen most clearly in the definition of those civil and political rights concerned with protection of the individual from violence (Charlesworth 106).

This construction of asylum policy denies the rights of women, which are seen as "private."

The definition of "social group" comes from *Sanchez-Trujillo v. INS* and reads as follows: "a collection of people closely affiliated with each other, who are actuated by some common impulse or interest" (*Sanchez-Trujillo*, 1576). From this, the court in *Gomez v. INS* states that, "Possession of broadly-based characteristics such as youth and gender will not by itself endow individuals with



membership in a particular group" (*Gomez v. INS*, 664).

First and foremost, there is a surface-level excuse for denying women survivors of assault "social group" status. Making such a change would create a flood of cases because the assault of women is such a widespread problem. The influx would put a drastic strain on the immigration system, so the government has a vested interest in resisting a broader definition to include women. The immigration system should be adequately altered and expanded so as to provide just assistance to the female victims of gender-specific torture.

Second, governments historically and presently fail to recognize the oppression of women. Governments deny the existence of gender-differentiated violence in war contexts. The male-centered law-making system is much to blame for this ignorance.

Because the law-making institutions of international legal order have always been, and continue to be, dominated by men, international human rights law has developed to reflect the experiences of men and largely to exclude those of women, rendering suspect the claim of the objectivity and universality of international human rights system itself is recognized and transformed, no real progress for women can be achieved (Charlesworth 103).

In this light, violence against women is not seen as systematic. Instead, it is viewed as personal violence, violence that occurs within the realm of the home or the "private" realm. From the perspective of the U.S. government, these "private" matters (i.e. domestic violence, sexual assault, gender-specific torture and mutilation) are matters best left to the criminal justice systems of the home country (Charlesworth and Chinkin 56). However, in a country such as El Salvador, where the government perpetrated the majority of such violence against women, deferment of legal responsibility to the home country has no relevancy for the victim. Regardless, rape is systematic, not only in "personal relationships," but also in war and in military dictatorships. When a government or powerful movement uses rape to achieve political ends, rape becomes a political issue. This is not to say that acquaintance rape, date rape, and other forms of sexual assault are not political acts of oppression: they also are systematically legitimized and

exercised through socio-cultural ideas about male dominance and sexual possession. However, in war and military regimes, the use of rape becomes a political weapon, with the intent to humiliate women, lower morale, and damage the honor of their male partners. These specific political goals prove that sexual assault victims in such contexts are victims of political crimes.

Third, if the U.S. were to recognize women as inhabiting a "social group," the government would have to directly address the issues of violence against women, which it has been reluctant to do. Through recognition, the government may be called to actually actively work against the problem through providing services, changing the language of the law, and providing institutional support of victims of violence against women. Sexual assault is an epidemic in the United States. Criticizing the prevalence of violence against women elsewhere in the globe



A comadres worker in the dispensary at the day care center in El Salvador. Photo by Mike Oso. <http://mikeoso.homestead.com>

would make the U.S. government look hypocritical, since very little has been done to decrease the amount of sexual assaults in the U.S. or to prosecute those guilty for such crimes. Because the U.S. has done very little to support survivors of sexual assault in the U.S., it does even less on a global scale to fight sexual assault and other forms of violence that affect women.

The definition of a "social group" must be expanded to include female survivors of gender-based violence. As a group, sexual assault victims do share common characteristics. They often carry psychological damage with them, due to the violation inflicted on them. Many suffer from eating disorders because controlling diet offers a means to control the body that was stripped of agency. Depression and deep shame are

common in those who are left without treatment, due to the societal view that survivors somehow "asked for it" and that their honor as women has been taken from them. Victims of mutilation may have visible signs of their torture, such as a missing breast or scars. Some people are tattooed, so as to identify them later as enemies. These forms of violence leave an imprint for others to identify them by. These physical marks bond survivors into a group that can be physically detected by outsiders, leaving them vulnerable to future attack.

"Political affiliation" is another term that has come to have a "public," male-centered connotation. Political affiliation is something that the courts generally require applicants practice through political parties, campaigns, or state-sponsored organizations. These distinctions ignore women's grassroots organizing. The rigid definition of "political affiliation" also overlooks the constraints women face in participation in "public" political work.

Women's roles and status in Salvadoran society keep them from joining political parties and organization. Women are expected to be mothers and caretakers. Socialization and societal pressure, strengthened by the Catholic Church, pushes women into motherhood. Childcare overwhelmingly falls into the hands of women, taking up much of their time. Despite these significant barriers, some women have been able to join the political parties and struggle in the "public" realm. One combatant, Maria Morales, expressed the institutional barriers that existed for women within the FMLN political party:

At the opportunity of receiving military or any sort of training, women would go where the men were because they had the space and the time, women had to take care of the house, and if you were young, you had to take care of your brothers and sisters. The logical result was that men keep having more opportunities to advance...and because of these capabilities they are in commanding posts; they decide how a strategy is going to be defined and we are not there...They don't take us into account (Shayne 14).

The feeling of disempowerment that women felt in the "public" political process pushed some women to reject the FMLN. A common objection from female FMLN members was the lack of recognition of gender issues.



Approximately thirty percent of the FMLN was female (Cosgrove 1). Despite this relatively high female membership, only a few women occupied positions of leadership. The overwhelming majority of women held non-combatant roles: cooking, radio work, communication, health care, etc. (Shayne 7). Due to the mixture of familial obligation, rejection, and traditionalism, many women looked for alternatives to political parties. These women formed their own grassroots organizations, which tend to operate more collectively. Much of this political work is not recognized because its predominant female membership is stereotyped as "private" work.

Most families in El Salvador are led by single mothers, which puts an additional strain on women's time, energy, and resources. Those who are married deal with machismo and control from their husbands. Women activists from El Salvador write at length about the resistance they faced from their husbands, which sometimes escalated to threats of divorce.

What would I do if he left? I was very young; I had children and no secure job...All the women in COMADRES had problems at home just like me. In fact, many of their problems were worse than mine. They had macho husbands who beat them, slept around, drank, and spent the family's food money on liquor and other women (Tula 70).

The cultural circumstances that women live under in El Salvador and around the world make it extremely difficult for women to work within the "public" realm of politics.

## COURT DECISIONS: THE LANGUAGE OF OPPRESSION

The public/private dichotomy is one of the many patriarchal mechanisms that have been enacted in order to diminish women's experiences. The sexist language of asylum decisions is similar to the language that has been typically used in the West to minimize all violence and discrimination against women. This includes "laissez-faire"

sexual assault policy, victim blaming, dismissal of violence against women, and the passive acceptance of rape. With asylum policy, sexist rhetoric is put into an international context, mixed with notions of the female "other," and merged with frenzied Cold War communist paranoia.

Over and over again, sexual assault has been deemed a "private" matter by the court system. As noted earlier, by naming rape as "private" or "personal" in nature, the government denies any responsibility for action. In an international context, the government transfers responsibility to the home government of the victim (Charlesworth 106). This is deeply problematized in a situation such as Salvadoran women. During the war, the military was trained, led, and funded by the U.S. government and the military factions were the sects that overwhelmingly committed most of the



Distributing food at the COMADRES office in El Salvador. Photo by Mike Oso. <http://mikeoso.homestead.com>

atrocities. When a female asylum applicant looks for assistance in the U.S. system, they are put into a no-win situation: their government commits the violence, and the U.S. directs their case right back to the jurisdiction of the assailants.

The dissenting opinion in the case *Lazo-Majano v. INS* is a clear example of the privatization of violence against women. In 1982, Lazo-Majano left her husband because of his dangerous abandonment of a right-wing paramilitary group. His desertion risked putting her family in grave danger. Soon after, a Sergeant whom she had known in childhood offered her work. Upon starting the job, he raped her at gunpoint and later with grenades. He accused her of being a subversive. He threatened to torture her if she ever talked about his torture of her. She was

a mother of three children and continued to work out of fear. The dissenting judge adamantly claims that because Lazo-Majano knew her assailant, the violence was personal. "She may indeed have suffered emotional and physical abuse in the course of her personal relationship with Sergeant Zuñiga, but such mistreatment is clearly personal in nature and does not constitute political persecution within the meaning of the immigration laws" (*Lazo-Majano v. INS* 1436). He adheres to a strict interpretation of the law that excludes most forms of violence against women. "The statutory concept does not purport to address the general plight of men or women in a particular social order...Neither does it endeavor to extend the laws of asylum or withholding of deportation to the myriad one-on-one interpersonal conflicts of emotional and physical confrontation not set forth in the statutes" (*Lazo-Majano v. INS* 1437). This refusal to see sexual assault as anything but personal ignores the prevalence of sexual assault worldwide and the use of rape as a political (and therefore "public" by patriarchal definition) tool.

The choice of the courts to not act in cases of sexual assault is political: it reflects the idea that violence against women is dismissible and trivial. Here, language is used to contort the meanings of women's experiences. The case of *Campos-Guardado v. INS*

involved a woman who has forced to watch the torture and murder of her male relatives and was subsequently raped and threatened with murder by members of the military. She suffered from a nervous breakdown and later ran into one of her assailants, who continued to stalk and threaten her. More than once in the case, these horrible acts of violence and terrorism were labeled as "civil disturbances" (*Campos-Guardado v. INS* 286, 290). By labeling rape, terrorism, and stalking as "civil disturbances" the court writes off the violence. It becomes comparable to any common complaint. The term "civil disturbance" could be used to describe something as benign as noisy party. Thus, the violence that Campos-Guardado experienced is transformed into a mere inconvenience and supposedly beyond the reach of the law.



The dismissal of crimes against women transfers into an ideology of rape acceptance. In *Gomez v. INS*, the petitioner was raped and beaten by guerillas on five different occasions. Her life was threatened and her home was vandalized. All of these incidents happened to Gomez before the age of eighteen. The judge stated that, "the only evidence that Gomez presented to support her claim of well-founded fear was that she had previously been brutalized by Salvadoran guerillas during her youth" (*Gomez v. INS* 663, emphasis added). When arguing that the category "women" is too broad to be considered a social group, the judge implies that the persecution of women is commonplace. "...we do not suggest that women who have been repeatedly and systematically brutalized by particular attackers cannot assert a well-founded fear of persecution. We cannot, however, find that Gomez has demonstrated that she is more likely to be persecuted than any other young woman" (*Gomez v. INS* 664). Apparently, the courts do not believe that suffering through five instances of rape is not only commonplace, it also is not enough to show probability of future violence.

Victim blaming is perhaps the most astonishing practice that the courts utilize in deciding cases involving violence against women. Not surprisingly, the dissenting opinion in Lazo-Majano repeatedly blames the woman for her repeated rape and torture. On multiple occasions he reprimands her for not going to the Sergeant's supervisor (*Lazo-Majano v. INS* 1437, 1439, 1440). He at one point even states that "His threats to accuse her were effective because she was unsophisticated enough to believe that this low-grade bully/tyrant might make trouble" (*Lazo-Majano v. INS* 1439). He naively believed that Lazo-Majano, dependent on the Sergeant for the welfare of her family and terrified by the Sergeant's military position, could viably make a choice to go to his superior. He neglects to see that this sort of abuse was commonplace during the war that the military was known to be corrupt. Even the judge who decided the case in Lazo-Majano's favor uses language that insinuates that she is culpable for her torture. He says that she "accepted taunts, threats, and beatings from him" (*Lazo-Majano v. INS*

1433). The language that the judges use reflects their limited knowledge about sexual assault. It illustrates the common problem of blaming the victim and believing that they could/should have prevented the attack. Blaming the victim for sexual assault minimizes the woman's experience and can have major psychological repercussions for the survivor.

## TESTIMONIOS: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LITERATURE

The asylum court system is inherently rigid. Asylum applicants are generally given a ten-minute interview with an INS officer, during which time they are expected to tell their history of persecution in detail, provide supporting



Antonia, one of the original founders of COMADRES. She's been arrested and tortured several times, and several family members have been killed. Photo by Mike Oso. <http://mikeoso.homestead.com>

evidence, and answer any questions. This short time period and the highly critical INS officers create an environment that is stifling and it is not surprising that many stories are never heard. Ten minutes is definitely not enough time for a woman to be able to return to her memories of torture, rape, and other struggles. When the cases do go to court, the applicant is up against intense scrutiny from judges, who are highly suspicious that asylum applicants only wish to obtain the economic benefits of U.S. citizenship. Unfortunately, many women get turned away from the INS offices due to their inability to describe or clearly remember the memories that one has tried to forget.

When you give your testimony, you start to relive all the difficult things that have happened to you. It's very hard to constantly remember all those terrible

moments. But when I think about the hundreds and thousands of people in El Salvador who have similar stories, and who never had the opportunity to tell anyone, then I feel I have to make a real effort to tell my story one more time. For them (Tula 174).

*Testimonios* are a form of literature that has given some women the opportunity to be heard. *Testimonios* blend the lines between personal/political, public/private, individual/community, and history/current events. Lynn Stephen describes *testimonios* as literature that comes out of times of revolution and meant to tell the stories of those otherwise ignored (Stephen 224). For feminism, they are particularly important because they are reflective of the feminist values of honoring personal experience, building bridges between those who are different, and empowering women (Stephen 226-227). *Testimonios* are generally told from the vantage point of an individual, but the stories are meant to be reflective of a population of people. The "we" in *testimonios* become much more important than the "I." "A significant part of their authenticity and credibility is bound up in the idea of representing a collective truth, one typically marginalized through centuries-long processes of class domination, and racial, ethnic, and gender oppression" (Stephen 228). Stephen points out two dangerous pitfalls that western readers often fall into: objective judgment and construction of the "other."

The truth discussed in *testimonios* is not intended to be an objective truth and certainly some aspects of history are left out. Another important point to keep in mind is that the *testimonios* should not be exoticized or viewed as the sole voice for Latin American women (Stephen 229-230). However, when viewed as a source of common subjective history in a world of a myriad of histories, relationships of solidarity can be built between reader and author/community.

*Testimonios* literature speaks truth to power. The women's *testimonios* that I have examined, namely *Hear My Testimony* by Maria Teresa Tula and the works in the collection *A Dream Compels Us* edited by New Americas Press, locate multiple sites of oppression and hold them accountable for their



actions. This model challenges the paradigm of the INS, which tends to only recognize oppression in one context: public political repression, ignoring sexism, racism, classism, and all other politics outside of the "public" realm. Maria Teresa Tula talks about the connection between her identity as a woman and the political struggles of her country.

In El Salvador, we don't run around calling ourselves feminists, but we are feminists because we are fighting for our rights. The difference for us in El Salvador is that our struggle as women comes together with our struggle for change in El Salvador. Our feminism doesn't just involve fighting for ourselves, but for a change for all of us...If there isn't drastic social change in our country, then we will always be oppressed, even if we win our rights as women (Tula 125).

Tula's words also create a bridge between western feminists and Latin American women, pointing out the shortsightedness of western feminism to only look at gender oppression. In an asylum interview it would undoubtedly be risky to discuss how U.S. intervention in El Salvador has been a major source of violence and repression, causing a person to flee. This could be interpreted as "anti-American," resulting in denial of asylum. Women have used their *testimonios* to oppose the U.S.'s support of the Salvadoran military.

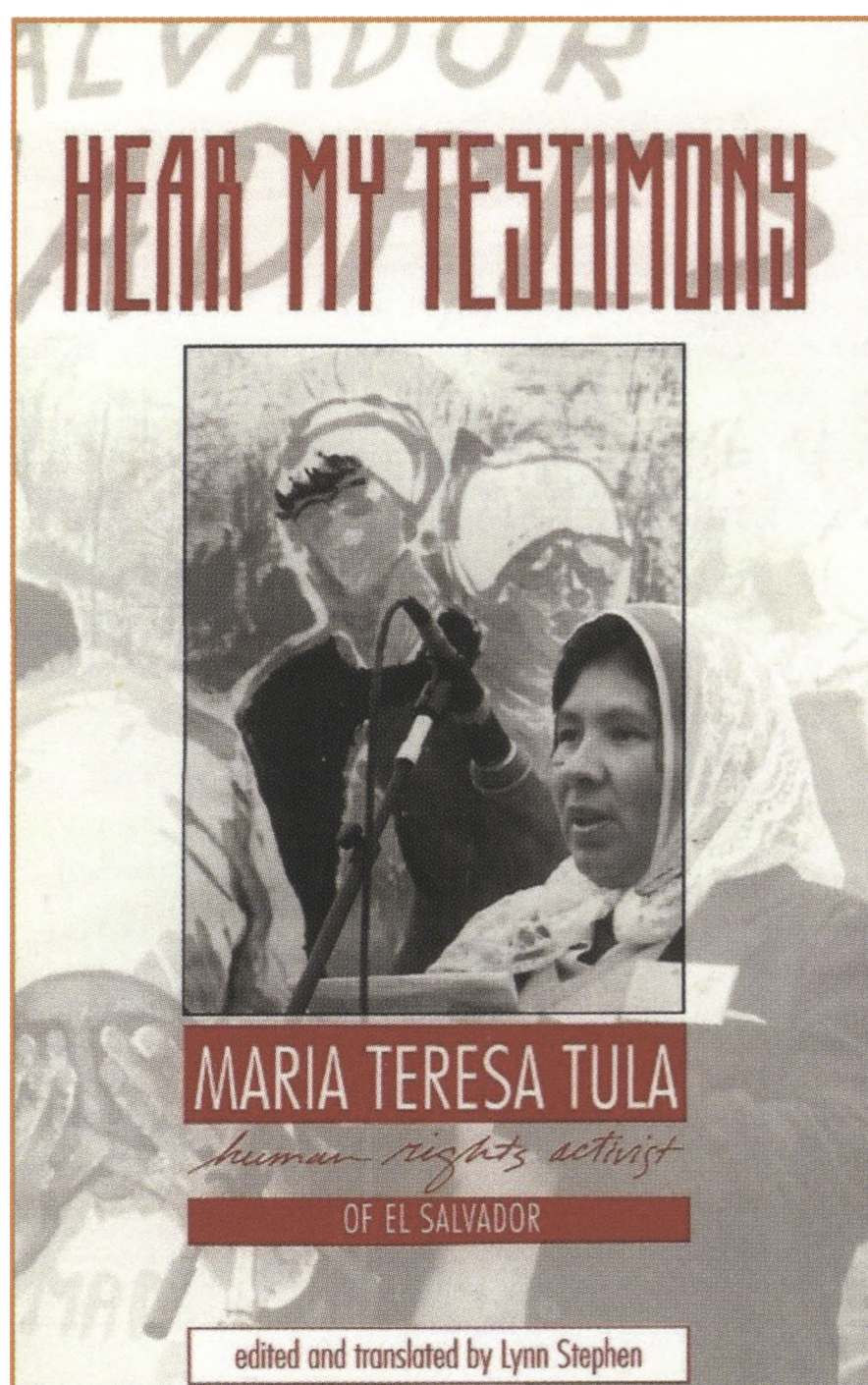
North American women can help Salvadoran women by explaining to the public about the repression against women and children that is going on in El Salvador. The U.S. public should know that women and children continue to be massacred...Because U.S. intervention is growing, it is increasingly important that these atrocities be denounced and be made known to the North American public (New Americas Press, 105).

Tula uses her *testimonio* to speak out about her biased asylum proceedings in the U.S.

The State Department opinion attached to my asylum case stated that I was a terrorist, anarchist, communist, and a guerilla fighter and that I would present a security problem for the United States. They said they didn't believe that I was captured and tortured; they said I had made it all up just to receive political asylum. The State Department also said that there

was respect for human rights in El Salvador. This was their answer to my request for political asylum" (Tula 172).

By explicitly naming the powers that are responsible for repression, the women in these *testimonios* challenge the hegemonies that have oppressed them. These stories exemplify the existence of interlocking oppressions and defy the power structures, such as the INS, that attempt to brand them with single-identities. Through their stories they become more than Salvadoran citizens: they are Latinas, women, mothers, feminists, guerilla fighters, human rights activists, union organizers, only to name a few.



Book provided by The Center for Latino Research

Personal history is fundamental to explaining one's identity and the reasons behind their current situation. Through *testimonios*, women can tell their stories, beginning sometimes with the stories of their ancestors or with their own childhood. Often, a person's early history is vital to understanding their political vantage point. Carmen Compos, a member of COMADRES, demonstrates how personal experience acts as an impetus for radical political involvement. Compos' three brothers, daughter, sister, father, uncle, sister in law, and children were all disappeared at different times during the war (New Americas Press 58-59). The military often tried to eliminate whole families of a "subversive" in an attempt to

cleanse the country of any ties to "communists." Compos then found COMADRES, the Committee of Mothers of the Disappeared in El Salvador.

Before, I felt alone. My life was spent crying for my children. But my children are no longer suffering and they will never come back to me. Now I'm fighting for my suffering people, and this is the struggle of all the mothers in my country. And so we go out into the streets without fear. If we are killed, well, that's the way we'll die. But we won't be silenced. And we know that one day we will win and the situation will change" (New Americas Press 59).

Maria Teresa Tula spends chapters discussing her childhood in poverty, the pressures on young women in El Salvador, her relationships with her union member husband, and her children. She also talks about her transformation from the wife of a union leader into a human rights activist.

I began to realize more and more what was going on by listening to the testimonies of the other women. They told stories of their children taken away wounded, taken away from their jobs, disappeared. All of these stories entered my head and began to change the way I thought. "How can it be that all of this goes on?" I wondered. "What is happening around us?" (Tula 56).

The connections between personal experiences and political work are traced through the personal histories that line the *testimonios*.

Political involvement takes many forms, and women's *testimonios* reveal the breadth and depth of women's resistance to the powers that be and their ability to organize, despite their subordinate status in society. Women's *testimonios* illustrate the ways that women have maneuvered their situations to best fit their goals. For instance, A Salvadoran nurse explained the circumstances of the hospitals in El Salvador during the war and how nurses were often kidnapped to serve the army. Despite the fear of kidnapping, her own son's disappearance, and the threat of being reported for not siding with the government, she helped to write a newsletter with the Nurses Association of El Salvador that petitioned the government (New Americas Press 41). Malena, an activist with AMES (Women's Association of El Salvador) used her *testimonio* to address exactly why the



women of AMES chose not to be a part of a larger movement.

As activist women, we feared that if we joined one of the larger mass organizations we might be relegated to the kitchen, to the laundry or to childcare. We wanted to work specifically with women, many of whom tend to be less politically advanced because of their marginalization. For these reasons, we've continued to maintain our independence as a women's organization (New Americas Press 94).

*Testimonios* breaks down stereotypes of women as victims. The combination of life story, cultural history, political awareness, and activism instills a well-rounded view of women in El Salvador. INS court opinions paint a picture of Salvadoran women as guilty victims, ignorant citizens, and submissive servants. *Testimonios* literature recognizes the violence, names it, and offers a vision of revolutionary change. Through testimonios, women defy the stereotypes that have been perpetuated about Central American women. Lydia, a Salvadoran labor organizer, describes the situation of women during the war and their perseverance to create change.

As a Salvadoran woman speaking from personal experience to women in the United States, I want to say that we have been through things you could never imagine. We've seen our children mutilated, our husbands disappeared. We've seen our sisters raped – even little girls as young as six years old. All this has been very hard for us, but we keep on going, because we want to create a new woman and a new society. We want a new woman to be born from our struggle for a new El Salvador. She will be a free woman, with equal rights in our society, a woman who is no longer a slave in her own home. We believe that woman all over the world...also face oppression and must fight for liberation (New Americas Press 47).

This sort of literature creates hope for the future. Lydia uses her experience and the experiences of other Salvadoran women and relates them to the lives of women worldwide. She uses the experience of violence to speak of being a survivor: pulling her strength from her struggle and using it to speak out against injustice.

The twelve-year war in El Salvador plagued the country with violence, persecution, terrorism, and fear.

Women's lives were drastically affected by this U.S.-supported war, and many fled to the United States for safety. In the U.S. they were met with an asylum policy governed by Cold War politics. Through careful feminist examination of Salvadoran women's court cases, sexist and xenophobic assumptions become apparent. Women's petitions were met with victim blaming and dismissal. In spite of this, women continued to petition: they took the streets in El Salvador, fought their cases in the U.S., and lived to write about it in their *testimonios*. The voices that permeate Salvadoran *testimonio* literature are proof that Salvadoran women are anything but silent victims. Through their survival stories and political work, they have redefined what it means to be a Salvadoran woman by challenging gender roles, challenged court system views of women by claiming that they do inhabit a persecuted social group, and demanded to be heard by writing *testimonios* from personal experiences and the lives of their communities.

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